

# PROCEEDINGS

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### A STEEL PLANT'S EFFECT ON REGIONAL PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

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CITY PLANNING DIVISION

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## A STEEL PLANT'S EFFECT ON REGIONAL PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Russell VanNest Black,<sup>1</sup> M. ASCE

The intention of the United States Steel Corporation to build a major plant in Lower Bucks County was first generally known in the summer of 1950. Less than three years later the plant was in operation. Costing in the neighborhood of five hundred million, it has an employment capacity of 6000 and a current payroll of around 5400. The plant occupies a site with a gross area of six square miles at the big bend of the Delaware River below Trenton. Expansion room beyond the 66 acres now occupied by buildings is said to be sufficient to permit a tripling of the present plant capacity.

The accompanying map, "Existing Industrial Areas", prepared by the Bucks County Planning Commission, shows the U. S. Steel property and plant location in relation to the southerly one-third of the county and to neighboring industries on the Pennsylvania side of the river.

It can be understood how both the rumor and the fact of this development created a stir in the locality. Steel processing was not new to the Trenton Region;—it had been one of the basic industries of the area for many years. But the introduction of a primary producer carried new implications not only because of its size but even more so because of its nature. Local reaction varied. Some people expected no good to come from this intrusion. They saw only the belching furnaces, the smoke, and the surrounding discrepancy usually associated with steel plants in this country. Others visualized great boom and boon, a great influx of new industry and soaring business. Actual performance, of course, is something in between.

Not the least-distorted early view was held by Steel's management. Approached as to possible interest and participation in advance planning for the region and the coming housing problem, a responsible Vice-President advised that the Company anticipated no great difficulties or much need for new housing. Most of the needed labor force, he thought, would commute from nearby Trenton and Philadelphia. Later, the Company's position in such matters changed considerably. While it made no money contribution to local planning it cooperated fully with the responsible local public agencies in their planning efforts. And it was indirectly responsible for the new town of Fairless Hills.

The current and impending development in Lower Bucks County is significant less by reason of its magnitude (bigger things have happened faster in other parts of the country) than because of its contrast with what existed and had gone before. It is a very big splash for so small and placid a puddle. Its immediate locale was a more or less lethargic

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backwater between Trenton and Philadelphia, mostly swamp and farm land. In the general area were a few sizable towns, some exceptional residential development, and considerable thriving industry. But for most of the now-booming territory, there had been comparatively little change for many years. True, its population had quadrupled during the preceding 100 years but was still only 82,417 in 1950.

Lower Bucks County comprises 10 boroughs and 12 townships, with a total area of 200 square miles. In 1950, only 10 per cent of the area was developed for residential, commercial and industrial purposes. By far the greater part of the new development is occurring in the rural areas, in the townships operating under a rudimentary form of government devised chiefly for the maintenance of farm roads and the collection of taxes. Both the number of political subdivisions involved and the obsolescence of their organization, powers and traditions have contributed, and are still contributing, greatly to the complexity of the planning and servicing problems of the area.

When Steel announced its intention of coming to Lower Bucks County, planning and zoning were well established in neighboring Trenton and Mercer County and in adjoining Philadelphia but was still virtually nonexistent in the area immediately concerned. There was no planning organization in the County and none among the 22 municipalities directly involved. In fact, planning authorization to townships had still to be enacted by the State Legislature. Only two or three of the municipalities were zoned and their ordinances were obsolete. Except for primary state highways, roads with rights-of-way greater than 33 feet were the exception. Only a small proportion of even the urbanized areas were sewered. Existing public water supplies were barely sufficient for the small areas served by them. School districts were already hard-pressed to keep up with normal increases in enrollment.

Then came the deluge—first in anticipation and then in fact. Under threat of upheaval even greater than has yet actually occurred, most of the municipalities and the County have been stirred to various forms of preparatory and protective action. Under stimulation by and with the financial assistance of the State, the County set up an adequately staffed Planning Commission which, for two and a half years, has been handling a difficult job better than might have been expected. The State extended full planning powers to the municipalities. The localities have been slow to act and most of them are not yet doing the job they should be doing but several have created planning commissions and have completed plans or are in process of doing so. All but four have adopted zoning ordinances of sorts and three of the four delinquent ones have ordinances under consideration. Seven special authorities have been created to provide water or water and sewer services; also nine school building authorities. And the State has entered with a concentrated highway planning and building program to relieve the aggravated traffic situation. The County Planning Commission is joined with the other two Philadelphia suburban counties for coordination of plans on a metropolitan basis. Much of planning remains to be done, particularly in educating the localities to do their part, but a good start has been made in a remarkably short time.

The primary planning responsibility for the area naturally rests with the County Planning Commission. The County Commission began a two-year intensive planning program with a budget of \$160,000, half supplied by the State as emergency aid. More than a year behind the parade in starting, this was by necessity a pressure program largely centered upon the critical area in the lower end of the county. Directed toward a thorough analysis of the situation and its potentialities and producing a long-range development plan for the area, it had to deal simultaneously with many current matters: handling the flood of new land development and housing schemes, stimulating the localities to take over their planning and zoning responsibilities, and educating local public officials and the general public in the implications and the necessities of the occasion. The initial over-all plan for the area has been completed, state aid has been terminated, and the Commission now enters the long pull of plan administration and all it entails.

A basic consideration in laying down a plan to guide the future development of Lower Bucks County was striking some reasonable balance between blue-sky prognostication and probability. The ultimate extent of the growth to come, and the rapidity of its occurrence, is anybody's guess. And no planner can afford to sell an area short in these matters. Neither can he travel too far into the never-never-land of the promoter and speculator. Here are some of the facts of the situation as illuminated by the findings and expectations of the County Planning Commission.

Transportation-wise, Lower Bucks County is in an extraordinarily favorable position. It is bisected by two main-line railroads and three important highways, one being U.S. Route 1, the main-stem highway between New York and Philadelphia. A turnpike extension, with a new bridge over the river and interconnecting the New Jersey and Pennsylvania Turnpikes, is now being built crossing its southerly end. A projected river expressway leading out of Philadelphia will serve its industrial centers. Other major highway extensions and improvements are contemplated or underway. Also projected, primarily to serve the Fairless steel plant but at the same time greatly enhancing the water-transport possibilities along the whole length of the river from Trenton to the sea, is channel improvement to a depth of 35 or 40 feet. Lacking only is a conveniently-placed commercial airport which could quite easily be corrected in part by improvement of Mercer Field at Trenton.

Including Steel's six square miles, land now owned or occupied by industry in the area totals 6600 acres. A good proportion of this land can be considered available for industrial expansion. Considered by the Planning Commission as eminently suitable for industrial development is an additional 5700 acres. This does not take into account the nearby industrial opportunities across the river or the places that industry might make for itself elsewhere in the area.

Industrial employment in the area increased from 20,330 in 1940 to 26,095 in 1949, and to 53,251 in 1953. Of the total 1953 employment, 16,648 was by four industries three of which predated U.S. Steel, and among which U.S. Steel was only second largest. The earlier-expected great tide of new ancillary industry to follow in the wake of Steel has not yet altogether materialized and the probabilities are it will not do so. A vigorous but more normal industrial growth now seems likely.

Land development and construction for residential and business purposes is far outrunning the increase in industrial plant and industrial employment. As in all such boom situations, speculation in such enterprises shows signs of exceeding probability. However, back of the disproportionate volume of new housing and land development in the area is a solid core of demand reaching beyond present and prospective industrial employment in the locality. The dramatic entrance of Steel, and the attending publicity and promotion threw a spotlight on an almost virgin territory at the fringe of large over-crowded populations hungry for nicely-packaged new houses in rural and semi-rural surroundings. Very few of the early home buyers in Levittown, for instance, indicated intention to seek employment in Lower Bucks County.

By far the largest and most spectacular of the new residential developments are the new towns of Fairless Hills and Levittown—the one approaching its planned size with a population of around 6200 and the other, planned for a population of 60,000 or 70,000, already grown to nearly 30,000. Except for these two concentrations, the new housing and land developments in the area (nearly a hundred of them projected since January 1, 1952) look like the work of a scatter-gun. Only a very few of them provide for more than 200 houses.

The County Planning Commission has plat-approval authority over all developments outside the corporate limits of the boroughs. By January 1st of this year and after two years of operation the Commission had processed or was processing land subdivisions totaling sufficient building lots for an additional population of 200,000, as opposed to an estimated population increase, since 1950, of 50,000. And as yet there is no evident diminution of the volume of subdivision plats milling through the County Office.

New subdivisions approved by the Planning Commission from January, 1952 to March, 1954 appear on the accompanying Commission map, "New Subdivisions". The large concentration comprises the presently approved portions of adjoining Levittown and Fairless Hills.

While the County Planning Commission has the primary platting-control authority, planned new streets and other public properties are also subject to approval and acceptance by the respective local governments. Not the least of the difficulties of the County Commission in applying modern development standards are the obstacles raised by local public officials. Experienced only in simple rural problems, they are slow to recognize the new order of things. They want no part in community playgrounds and wide streets. Never had playgrounds and don't want 'em. Thirty-three foot rights-of-way were good enough for William Penn—guess they'll do for a while longer. These fol-de-rols don't mean a thing but more trouble and expense. And added to the difficult and slow task of awakening local officialdom to its changed circumstances and responsibilities is the planner's nightmare of trying to bring some order and form into so nebulous a situation.

Time does not permit going into detail concerning the social and financial impacts of this revolutionary development upon the locality, but they are large and must be mentioned. Perhaps the most serious, because at the root of many of the others, is financial. Local services and facilities like those of schools, roads, and sewers, are largely de-



pendent financially upon local real-property taxation. Because low-value housing requiring high-volume public servicing is outrunning high-value industry with low-servicing requirements, the taxable valuations per capita in most of the localities are falling behind the increase in population and in the demands for service. This situation is greatly aggravated by the multiplicity of local taxing units, some of which are getting most of the high-value industry, while others are getting most of the low-value housing. Actually, the total ratables for Lower Bucks County show an increase over one hundred per cent since 1950 as opposed to a population increase of fifty per cent. But nearly a half of the total increase in ratables has fallen all in one of the townships, the home of U.S. Steel. Some progress toward solution is being made through the creation of various kinds of joint authorities and districts. Extensive consolidation has been proposed without much acceptance thus far, but it may be the only ultimate solution.

The situation is stimulating the community and the County to still other remedial and preventative action. A community chest has been organized. The County has created a County Health Department, the second in the State, and has appointed a County Park Commission. After many years of republican domination, there are even signs of the two-party system's rearing its ugly head in the County.

How solid the bubble and when and how soon it will burst no one knows. The County Planning Commission is playing it safe by estimating the population in the year 2000 at a high of 500,000 and a low of 240,000, with a probable of 315,000.





*Existing*  
**INDUSTRIAL AREAS**  
MANUFACTURING PLANTS & QUARRIES  
WITH 10 OR MORE EMPLOYEES

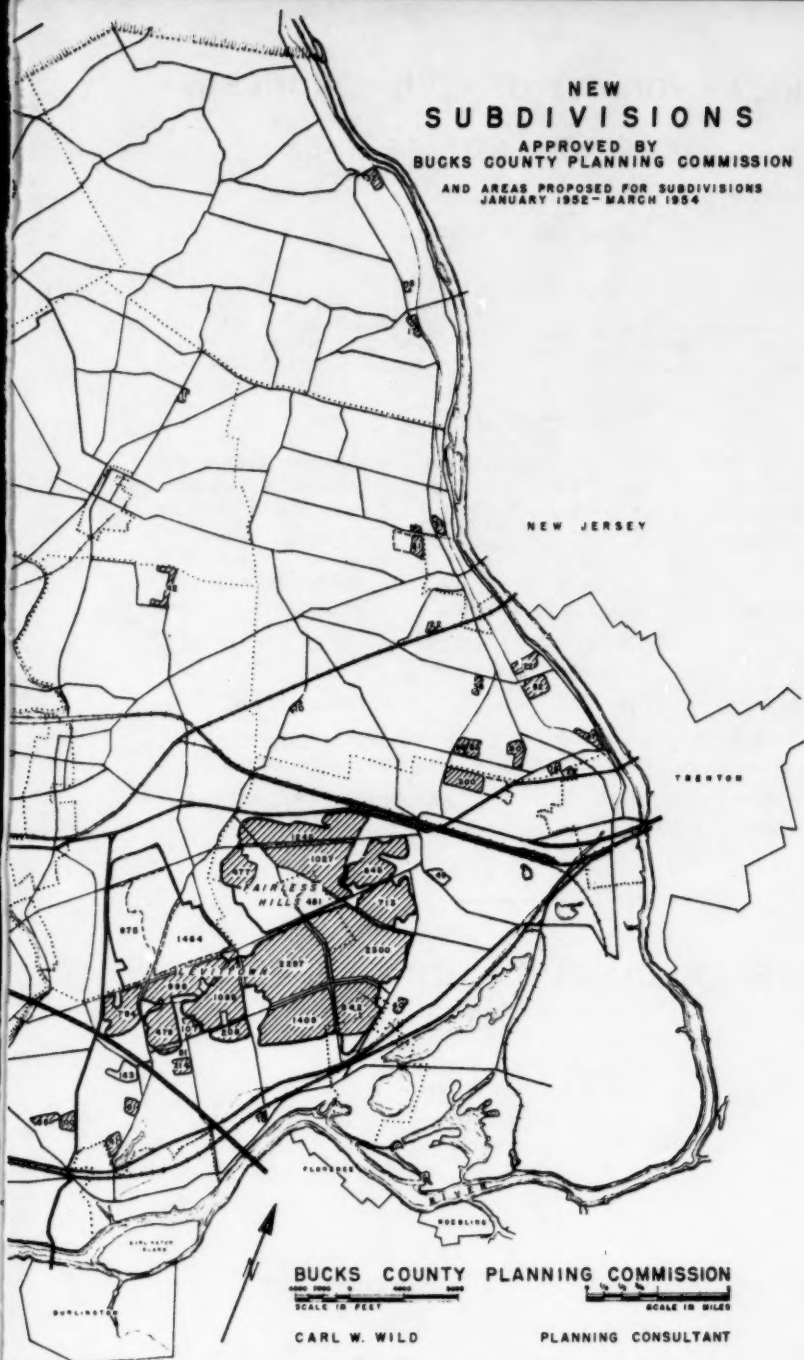




# NEW SUBDIVISIONS

APPROVED BY  
BUCKS COUNTY PLANNING COMMISSION

AND AREAS PROPOSED FOR SUBDIVISIONS  
JANUARY 1952 - MARCH 1954



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